

Imperial War Museum Accounts of Fovant.

The following extracts are taken from collections held at the Imperial War Museum, London. Transcriptions of the Imperial War Museum audio interviews have been produced with a deliberate focus upon the Fovant military camp. Audio transcriptions represent the interviews as recorded in their original form.

W. C. Cullford War Diary (09/34/1)

[...]

The first big change came on January 10 1916 when the whole battalion moved into camp at Fovant (8 miles from Salisbury) [.] A more miserable scene would have been hard for us then to imagine. The camp (huts) was deserted and dirty; the mud indescribable. The bed-boards, mattresses, blankets, were the reverse of inviting, and I am sure that most of us were pretty miserable that first night. Jack Swift and I managed to keep together, obtaining adjacent beds.

We soon settled down to training; and as the weather got better, the state of the camp improved, and our hours of work lengthened. Saturday afternoons, and Sundays after Church Parade were always free, apart of course from occasional guards and pickets. The training we received was very thorough – the instructions being generally competent, many of them being first battalion men sent home wounded. A month's intensive training in June brought us to as near perfect infantry men as it is possible to be without seeing any fighting.

Victor Polhill (LRB, 3rd Battalion) IWM Recorded Interview no. 9254.

[...]

Victor – It was a lovely hut, a big army hut, and when we got there, we got there late one night, and marched up from Fovant station in the dark, and when we got near the camp, the chap who was guiding us, he said... well, if you'd like to scramble through this hedge, up the bank, it will make us a short-cut. So we all scrambled through this hedge and... well, we thought... well, that's a bad start, you know, scrambling away over there. I think we had our kit bags with us then, I know it was quite an effort for some of these chaps to get through... Anyway, then we got to the hut where we were, and there were... a sleepy person said, 'oh... er...', he said 'it's two o'clock in the morning', he said that's the time when everybody's got least... sort of guts in their body to do anything. But anyway, we just had to lie on the floor that first night, and it was a very short night of course, but six o'clock we were up, and then we had to go along to some big barn and fill out our palliasses with straw, and by the time we left there at about three minutes later, of course the straw had gone as flat as pancakes, so it was just like laying on a piece of nothing really... but in the huts there were a little piece of wood at each end of a so-called bed, and the bed consists of three planks, three loose planks, which... we laid on the planks. In the morning, we took up the planks and the two bits of wood, and put them at the back of the hut, and once a week, the people who didn't go to the

Church Service, they had to wash the hut down and clean everything, and that was quite a job doing that – sprinkling water on and sweeping out and so on – but it kept the hut in beautiful, clean condition, and in the middle of the hut there was one of these black stoves with a round stow which you could use for heating and to put coal and wood in and so on... we were kept nice and warm in the hut. But later on, we had to come back to Fovant for our firing practice and firing tests and we had to occupy the huts that had recently been vacated by the ANZACs, and it was astonishing how filthy they were these huts, you know... I remember putting something on a shelf and god knows what went on the shelf, but I think somebody had emptied a tin of condensed milk there or something, but it was really dreadful, and I can only imagine the ANZACs didn't do any cleaning, and they said, well 'we came here to fight, not to be charladies', and nobody else had done any cleaning either, so it was very awful really.

Interviewer – While you were there, did you have regular hut and kit inspections?

Victor – Oh yes, that's right, yes. And we had to put all our stuff out on a ground sheet and sometimes it was said that one person at the end of the line switched his things along... if one person was short of something, it got... by the time the officer got to the other end of the line, it had been found with these things you see, passing them along. But anyway, we had kit inspections.

Interviewer - Did that actually happen?

Victor – I think it may have done, I don't know really... It was a job to get all the kit together, you know, whether anybody particularly worried I don't know, because it happened in France too, the kit...

Interviewer – Were the inspections strict in the hut?

Victor – A clean hut was very strict, definitely, yes. They were very keen on cleanliness, very clean on shaving. If you thought that you didn't need a shave, you were told to jolly well shave whether you needed it or not. And that was the whole of the time... [...]

Interviewer – Sticking mainly to the training period, did you resent this, the inspections and this insistence on 'spit and polish'?

Victor – No, not a bit. Not really, no. 'Spit and Polish' was nice and all these route marches and drills... we used to say that when the war's over, we'd like to come back to Fovant and have a fortnight or a month there training, because we felt so fit and, well, with all this exercise and so on...

Interviewer – What were the sanitary arrangements like at the camp? Did the latrines and washing arrangements... what were they like?

Victor – Oh, they were very nice, very clean and... yes, washing arrangements were good. We used to have to wash our own... well, I washed my own shirt once or twice, but after that, I used to send it home, and my mother used to wash it and send it down again. But a lot of the chaps used to wash their own things. I remember I borrowed somebody's soap once to do some... to wash my shirt, and I

used such a lot of it that he was quite annoyed about it and I had to buy him another piece of soap because I'd used all his on... I'd used a lot of it. But after that, I used to send mine home.

Interviewer – What was the food like at Fovant?

Victor – Oh, food was very good. It was just plank tables and plank seats we sat in, but we had bacon every morning, several slices of bread – I don't think there was any butter on the bread – just bacon, and then I suppose there was bread and ham, but my pal was so slow in getting reading in the morning and shaving, and one thing and another, that quite often, he didn't turn up for breakfast, and he used to say, 'well bring me back some... a sandwich', and I used to bring him back two big slices with a bacon in between them – that was quite common on our table. What annoyed me, what I felt rather surprised... when we'd finished our bacon and stuff, quite a number of the soldiers would just take a chunk of bread and they'd use it to clean their plates, and then chuck it away, and I thought, 'well, what a waste of good bread to use it just to clean your plate'. But there was no method really of... I can't remember any hot soda water or anything like that [...]. Don't remember that at Fovant.

Interviewer – What about your lunch-time? What did you get then?

Victor – Oh yes, lunch-time I presume we had stew and rice and stuff, but maybe we did in France... I can't remember much what we had for meals... I can only remember the breakfast really, which was always a nice chunk of bacon and...

Interviewer - Did you get enough food?

Victor – Oh plenty, yes. Although a lot of the chaps used to go into the canteen and buy food, and I remember they used to have mash potatoes and sausages, and they used to call it 'two Zeps and a cloud'. The 'Zeps', of course, was a Zeppelin – that was a fancy name for it. But quite a lot of chaps used to go into the canteen and have that sort of meal, but we never felt that amount of hunger – we didn't mind eating biscuits and things. We had good teeth and that sort of thing.

Interviewer – I'd like now to ask you about the training you did at Fovant. Could you take me through the various activities – what was the drill like?

Victor – Oh well, it was pretty tiring and, to start with, it was very tiring... and as we got used to it of course it was lovely, but, yes... we did bayonet practice, bayonet putting into various sacks of straw that were hung up [...] at various parts of the body [...] and the sergeants were very good who took us through that tutorial – they were a different group that did that.

Interviewer – What did you think about the bayonet training? Was there any emphasis on blood-thirstiness, or was it dispassionate [...]?

Victor – Oh, I think they liked to make it as blood-thirsty as possible, but I think we all took it as a joke really. I don't think any of us worried too much about it.

Interviewer – What about route marches?

Victor – The route marches... they were jolly good really. Yes, they took you a long way, and... I only had one blister the whole time I was in the LRB – that was in France – but otherwise, my feet and everything were okay, and providing your feet were good and you were a good walker, route marches were very nice and we used to sing as we went along. I remember one of the things we used to sing was: ‘we are the boys of Section number two, we something do what we were told to do...’ [...]. I forget how it went after that, but years later, I used to sing it at home [...].

Interviewer – How far would you go on a route march?

Victor – Oh dear, I shouldn’t like to say. A long way. Occasionally, we had night operations and we’d have to walk over towards the downs in the dark, and the idea then was to keep in touch and be told how to keep in touch and if the chap behind wasn’t there, we used to... had to wait for him, but it was the thing that I later on realised how important it was. But of course, in the darkness, it is important because if you lose touch, you’ve had it. A lot of the troops must have spent hours trying to find their way to various places.

Interviewer – Were there any other tactical exercises? Like advancing... did you do any of that?

Victor – Yeah, not so much at Fovant. No, not so much, I’m surprised that we didn’t do more than we did do... No, I don’t think we did. Of course by that time, we’d heard about the Somme, and the way they all went over... and the machine guns... and mowing them all down, and we got to meet wounded people who were well enough to come back to be at the camp, and I don’t remember ever having the opportunity to asking them much about it, but perhaps the authorities then felt that this line of troops wasn’t necessarily the better way of doing things.

Interviewer – Did you have any training in rifle shooting?

Victor – Oh, a lot in rifle shooting, yes. Musketry instructors... and my friend Ben Ackham [?], later on in the war, he was a musketry instructor himself [...] for quite a long time. We had to aim the rifle at the eye of the instructor and have blank cartridges and that sort of thing... and he was able to make sure that we were aiming correctly and that sort of thing. And we used to have to clean the rifles, keep on cleaning the rifles. It must have worn the rifles out, I think, this perpetual cleaning, and used to have to put our thumb in the lock of the rifle so that the inspector of the musket inspector can look down the barrel and see that the barrel was perfectly clean. But in my opinion, there was almost too much cleaning in the army, and that way... a chap with a motorbike had to take it to bits, and a chap with a car... he’d always take that to bits, and... you know, it was ridiculous the amount of cleaning they did. [...]

Interviewer – Did you have any training in bombing?

Victor – Oh yes, we had training in bombing with the Mills Bomb... that was quite good. And I suppose we must have thrown live bombs, but we also had training in gas, but the gas we had at that time... the gas masks were... we really had a rag or a piece of cloth [...] and we had to put that

across our faces, and that seemed to be the gas mask up to that moment... but when we arrived in France, we had a proper gas mask.

Interviewer – Did you practice digging trenches and things like that?

Victor – No, I don't think we did. I can't remember anything like that.

Interviewer – Did your training make you feel fully competent for what you were about to face while you were at Fovant?

Victor – Yes, I think it was, you know... we were very tough then by the end of three or four months... and, you know, we handled the rifle quite well, and... implant the bayonet into the rifle... they were, you know, fixed bayonets as it were. We had no idea what we got to do on the other side, but I felt, you know, we knew all we need know. We knew about the bombs. I think that was alright. [...]

Interviewer – Did you get the opportunity to go out from the camp [...]?

Victor – Oh, we had some lovely walks. Yes, my friend and I, we... our interest in anything was to go out of the camp and... all the little local villages, and Salisbury, and that sort of thing... and so while the others were playing cards or doing various other things in the canteen and drinking, we were out enjoying the country, and the country walks. I have some nice photographs of various places we visited.

Interviewer – How did you get on with the local population?

Victor – Well, I suppose that we didn't really see much of them, you see. I don't remember ever going into Fovant village at all. I think once we were out of the camp, we were tending to go farther distances, you know? And that sort of thing... And so we didn't see much. When we got to Dawlish... I remember once we got into Teignmouth,¹ and into a tea shop there, and we were very surprised to see the company of arms men... there were the head of the... all the sergeants and things, he was there having tea and we thought... well, we were quite surprised to think that anybody like that went into a tea shop with... but we didn't seem to go into many shops. We liked Salisbury, the cathedral and that sort of thing, and when we got to Exeter, we compared Exeter Cathedral with Salisbury Cathedral. [...]

Interviewer – What recreational activities did you do inside the camp?

Victor – Yes... once they had a sort of... [...] marathon, and one of our chaps that went in it, he got a double rupture because of that, so he didn't do well. But we didn't go in for anything like that. I think they had football, but... there was nothing indoors in the way of sports of anything like that as far as I know... unless they did those things in the canteen, but as we never went to the canteen...

¹ The interviewee has mistakenly cited places in close proximity to Exeter, as opposed to Fovant.

Interviewer – Why didn't you go to the canteen?

Victor – Well, we didn't drink you see. We were both abstainers and non-smokers, and, you know, there was nothing in the canteen to interest really – we didn't want any extra food. I don't know what... one time, we had a concert, and I can only remember the one concert, and someone... people came down from London I suppose, or maybe [...] local singers, and there was a girl sang 'A Long, Long Trail', and I always remember that as what she sang. [...] But that's the only thing at Fovant I remembered, was this one concert.

Interviewer – Because you didn't smoke and you didn't drink, did that affect... your relationship with the rest of the men in your unit? Were you seen as a bit 'standoff-ish', or what?

Victor – Oh no, it didn't... [...], but I know I [illegible word] that a lot of information, especially in France, a lot of discussion as to what happened – you see, we do something, like on the third of May when we went over the top and two people... one person got badly injured and somebody else was shot, and that sort of thing, but we never had an opportunity of discussing the things with anybody, because didn't go into the stamaines, or the place where perhaps the rest of the lot were talking, so that whether or not so and so was badly injured, or how he was injured, or whether he was taken in, or any of that, we never knew you see... and I think perhaps a lot of information we might have had, we never got by not mixing with the others so much.

Interviewer – But you certainly didn't get bullied or looked down upon at all?

Victor – Oh no, not a bit, no. No, when we first got out to France...

Interviewer – Were there many people who didn't drink or smoke?

Victor – Oh, I shouldn't think many. No, I think probably the last two chaps we had in our platoon in France, they were older chaps...

Interviewer – How did you react to the military discipline and lifestyle, and the lack of privacy in this early stage in your army life?

Victor – Well, I suppose we took for granted that... we were so green in every way, that we took it all okay. I remember one of the lectures we had was on venereal disease and that sort of thing, and we didn't know much about anything really. We just took everything in that was told us, and so on... but as far as the military discipline... well, the NCOs were very nice chaps, and the officers that... I can't remember many of the officers, but the ones I remember were nice chaps that... you know... were keen, and... they were all LRB-conscious as it were, you know... they felt they were in a good regiment, and a good name to keep up.

Interviewer – Was there a great feeling of identification with the battalion and with the regiment?

Victor – Oh, I think so, I'm sure. That's right. And that was a tragedy that a lot of drafts went out and instead of being posted to the LRB, they were posted to other things, you know... they might be

posted anywhere. One of our chaps, he went out... a very keen LRB man, and he was posted to the Civil Service Rifles. [...]

Interviewer – The third battalion was just purely for training?

Victor – Yes, and feeding the first. The third never went out as a battalion. They just were a feed to the first battalion or to anybody else that wanted men apparently.

Interviewer – How long were you at Fovant then, before...?

Victor – Oh, well we stayed at Fovant from until about November, and then we moved up into Exeter and we were [...] in a billet there for about a week, and then they suddenly realised we hadn't done our firing practice or firing thing, so they took us back to Fovant for about a week or fortnight to do our firing. That's when we were occupying this ANZAC camp. And from that billet, back to Fovant, we went back to Exeter again for a week or two, again in a billet, and from there on to Dawlish.

John William Terrell (London Regiment, 8th Battalion) IWM Recorded Interview no. 11044

[...]

Interviewer – How long were you at Blackheath?

John – Well, I think we left there about the middle of January 1916, and we went down to Fovant... we entrained I think at Lewisham Station, and [...] travelled all the way around London, and eventually got on the South-West line and Dinton was the station that we got out at. That was two stations beyond Salisbury. I think the line runs Salisbury, Wilton, and Dinton, and we were a short distance from Dinton Station... and, of course it was a purpose-built camp and, you know, you had the trestle beds that was three planks on two trestles about... well, I suppose about six inches off the floor. You also got a palliasse which you filled... got filled with straw, and you had four blankets... and of course the messenger arrangements were absolutely marvellous in comparison to what we'd suffered at Blackheath.

Interviewer – So a real improvement, a real luxury?

John – Oh yes, yes. You could... they used to call it gunfire – you had to go to the cookhouse, your company cookhouse to... we were dished out with basins there, not with mess tins, basins. And you got that pretty near full up with tea. That was gunfire at six o'clock, and , well, you used to have to get yourself tidied up a bit, wash, shave *et cetera*... I always shaved a great deal in those days, but then we used to go out on parade and various activities...

Interviewer – What sort of activities were you doing at Fovant?

John – Well, there again it was marching and drilling, and going on route marches, going out for the whole day sometimes on a route march, and generally something to keep you fit really. And of course, at Fovant, there was three... a one camp and the lower part was occupied by the London Rifle Brigade, and then came our lot – we were the middle lot, the eighth. And then the third camp up top was occupied by the sixth... third battalion, sixth London. And, they were the ones I believe... the sixth... the only ones who had a proper band. We just had a bugle affair. So when you went out... for a route march, if you were in B company, well you never heard them... never heard when the bugles went, but... and of course, we did our rifle... we did our shooting on the range, and we used to go down there sometimes, do the marking, like down in the butts and, you know, in or out or bull's-eye and so on, and then you had... we had a very comprehensive training really. I mean, they were prepared to do you for six months, which was... well, very good really, if you're seeing that they were... wanted you in France as quickly as possible.

Interviewer – When you went on a route march, for the whole day, how far would you go?

John – Well, I suppose we used to start off somewhere about nine and well, we used to go down to Shaftsbury and[...] that way, and... I think it was fifty minutes each hour, you got a ten-minute rest. You used to take a ration of a kind with you... have as a snack, as it were, mid-day... and your water bottle, that was all you had in the way of drinks... water, and no other method of getting a drink.

Interviewer – Did you have any trouble with you feet, adjusting to route marching?

John – None whatsoever. Well, of course, as a messenger, you were on your feet all day, and you don't know how many miles you might have travelled during the day, walking about really... delivering those telegrams.

Interviewer – So your feet were already very tough?

John – Yes, I hadn't a corn on them, they are quite good now.

Interviewer – Were there any of the soldiers who *did* have trouble with the route marching? Did you have anyone who dropped out with blisters or trouble like that?

John – Oh yes, four fall out, but not often... I mean, we were all young fellows really... never used to have any... they were all more or less fit. Used to get the occasional ones drop out.